

Cultural Studies Review  
volume 18 number 3 December 2012  
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrrj/index>  
pp. 171–93  
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## **Between Noise and Silence**

### **Architecture since the 1970s**

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Architecture and the city offer natural subjects to the increasingly secure field of noise and sound studies. Noise and noises inflect the experience of the urbanite in cities of all scales, lending aural substance to what Georg Simmel famously described as ‘the intensification of emotional life’.<sup>1</sup> For architecture, noise is a matter of acoustics, of relational experience, of the often blurred distinction between individual, social and institutional zones. Numerous studies have sought to account for the variety and effect upon social and cultural environments of what R. Murray Shafer coined the ‘soundscape’, trading the optic supremacy of the picturesque tradition of regarding the city visually for a textured sense of the city as heard and of urban action as noisy.<sup>2</sup> Televisions, parties, cars and ambulances, conversation: this ‘auditory terrain in its entirety of overlapping noises, sounds and human melodies’ serves to orientate one in relation to buildings and cities and may be as welcome to one individual as it is repellent to another.<sup>3</sup> Even in the rural town or the countryside, noise registers in its absence or by its difference.

Vision, visuality and the capacity for architectural projection form a foundation for the long development of the modern (and modernist) architectural project from the Renaissance to the present day.<sup>4</sup> The interdependence of architecture's capacity to see the future from the standpoint of the present and its imperative to work towards that future's realisation has been fundamental to the ambitions and failures of modern architecture in the twentieth century. Pursuing this now well-established historical judgment on different terms, we here follow Jacques Attali's invitation to judge, instead, by what can be heard rather than seen.<sup>5</sup> This essay considers noise in architectural discourse as it might lend form to issues hitherto tabled in rather different terms. We ask what noise offers this discussion or, perhaps better put, what seeing architectural debates in terms of distinctions between noise and silence, random and structured sound, silence as absence and pregnant void might add to disciplinary debates within architectural theory and criticism. By treating these acoustic values analogously rather than literally we wish to suggest that reading the late postmodern moment through this filter opens out new possibilities for a critical assessment of this period and its present-day legacies.

Our task, then, is to consider the conceptual implications of 'noise' for architecture since the advent of postmodernism and to understand something of the stakes of 'noise'—read metaphorically against its two counterpoints, silence and language—in the operation of critical thinking in contemporary architectural culture and practice. Our reading is openly speculative, considering as it does the implications of noise and its attendant opposites as conceptual categories with interpretative and critical consequences. These consequences seem to us particularly poignant in light of values and strategies that align with an idea of silence and its interruption in determining the role of architectural form, architectonic and conceptual space in architectural debate and practice of the present and recent past. Those values and the examples that have served as their most obvious expositions have provoked discussion (once more) on the often tense relationship between architecture's critical and productive activities—including critical action through practice and propositional thinking through criticism.

Although we will turn to specific architectural cases in the second half of the essay, our narrow entry to this theme is through an essay by the Italian architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, first published in 1974 in the American journal

*Oppositions*, titled '*L'Architecture dans le boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language*'.<sup>6</sup> Tafuri's essay concerns the subject and tasks of the architectural critic and as much as the essay now reads as a dated reflection on past problems it nevertheless touches upon basic distinctions of enduring pertinence to the way that critical discourses conceptualise and engage architectural production—a mirror, therefore, on cultural production read more broadly. This is a matter that concerns architecture specifically, and in specific ways, within a cultural field. This problem, along with the terms that Tafuri allows us to consider in light of a tension between noise and silence, allows us to conduct a reading of a historical moment in architectural culture of the late twentieth century. It also opens out onto the broader role of critical thinking in what has been controversially dubbed, in architecture as elsewhere, a post-critical, post-historical moment, in which positions determined and debated in the 1970s are played through to their full extension.<sup>7</sup>

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Unsurprisingly for the time in which Tafuri wrote, the concept of language serves him as an extended analogy for understanding the content and compositional systems of architecture, both historically and in the present. The well-established historiographical conceptualisation of space and classicism as architectural language fed a critical reaction by Tafuri and his contemporaries of architecture's tendency towards introspection and away from the realities of procurement, realisation and occupation that determined architecture's status in the world much more than did architectural intentions, traditions or conceptual underpinnings.<sup>8</sup> His criticism of a trans-historical (and hence super-real) classical or spatial language of architecture was a symptom of a broader struggle in the postwar decades, waged by critics on behalf of a broader architectural culture, to understand architecture's conceptual and political limitations in the wake of the evident institutional and social failings of architecture's mid-century modern movement.

It is in this light that we begin from a single line in which Tafuri writes of 'the noise of Aymonino and the silence of Rossi'. Tafuri addresses a supremely contrapuntal moment in the Milanese Quartiere Gallarate (1967–1972): a housing project master-planned by Carlo Aymonino, but in which is embedded a building by Aldo Rossi that offers a formal island removed, as Tafuri put it, 'from the sphere of



Figure 1: Quartiere Gallarate, Milan, depicting blocks by Aldo Rossi (l) and Carlo Aymonino (r)  
(Photograph: Silvia Micheli. All rights reserved.)

the quotidian'.<sup>9</sup> In simple, compositional terms, the situation is roughly that of a late-neorationalist building appearing in the midst of a late-neorealist precinct, where the (literally) white block insisting upon order, system and rhythm met the (literally) grey complex privileging formal disjunction and typological juxtaposition. (We will return to the significance of 'white' and 'grey' below.) Tafuri invites us to read silence and noise as code for, on the one hand, a mute moment of conceptual and artistic autonomy and, on the other, architecture's integration within a technical, social, economic and political reality that necessarily determines aspects of the work, including its historicity.

As Fulvio Irace read the project two decades later, Rossi's contribution to the Gallarate complex is a 'unicum' in which Aymonino's 'projective idea of the quarter as a "contracted" city' is exposed in light of the 'fallacies and difficulties' of translating a conceptual position into a world shaped by the messiness and irrationality of construction and inhabitation.<sup>10</sup> As a moment of criticism, Rossi's silence serves to remonstrate Aymonino and his conceptual manoeuvre of treating noise as language, the random as a system, normalising reality as a compositional

value by finding within it a form of linguistic structure, albeit cacophonous. Aligning our own reading with Tafuri and Irace, Rossi's critical act rests upon his pursuit of the value of language to its logical conclusion. That is, Rossi stakes out a position of conceptual silence by absorbing and neutralising the random and the irrational.

Italian architectural culture of the 1960s and 1970s was informed by a heavily politicised discourse on architecture's formal and conceptual autonomy in which Aymonino and Rossi—alongside others of their generation—conducted a sustained investigation into architecture's role as an agent and index of socioeconomic and political change. The Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, where Aymonino, Rossi and Tafuri all served as professors, was arguably at the forefront of that exploration within Italy, serving nationally and internationally as a talisman for architecture's confrontation with its political dimensions. As much as that historical discourse was idiosyncratic and bound to particular historical and institutional circumstances, it shed light, then as now, on more general conditions of an architectural culture in which the encounter between ideas and reality remains awkward. According to one position of that earlier moment, architecture's efficacy lay with its rigorous isolation from the world at large; and for the other, its insistent integration.



Figure 2: Quartiere Gallarate, Milan, depicting blocks by Aldo Rossi (foreground) and Carlo Aymonino (background)  
(Photograph: Silvia Micheli. All rights reserved.)

If architecture could be cast by Tafuri as a coherent if obsolete language still bound in the 1970s to the modern movement—the utopianism of which had been shown to be groundless and the radicality of which had proven ineffectual—then the critical manoeuvres available to the architect were either extra-linguistic or anti-linguistic. Extra-linguistic, in this sense, points to the unadapted reuse of words and phrases, analogously speaking, as an extension or foil of the modern architectural tradition: words beyond syntax, fragments with no sense of the whole.<sup>11</sup> Tafuri accused such architectural practices as those captured under the epithet of the New York Five—Peter Eisenman, John Hejduk, Michael Graves, Charles Gwamthey and Robert Siegel, and Richard Meier—of recycling the ‘battle remnants’ of architecture’s historical avant-garde, invoking radicality through the deployment of formal fragments and compositional tactics divorced from the program for which they were first devised. This rendered contemporary architectural practice as a kind of Civil War re-enactment in which uniforms and projectiles that once mattered a great deal had come to matter only to those actors whose nostalgic gestures were ultimately without risk. In critical shorthand, this was the ‘White’ position of the American 1970s and 1980s, uttering ‘mute signals of a language whose code has been lost’.<sup>12</sup>

The consensus among critics within Tafuri’s circle was that if a cohesive and articulate modern movement had failed to inform the conditions of twentieth-century society, then the means to overcome architecture’s impasse lay beyond that disciplinary or artistic language, the structures ensuring its autonomy. They located the paradox of this situation in the twentieth-century legacy of the architectural project as the model of practice and introspective thought that had lent architecture an artistic and intellectual coherence from the emergence of a post-medieval epoch to the modern age.

Easily confused with what many perceived as his declaration of the ‘death of architecture’, Tafuri posed the problem of whether the problems of architecture and the city were, ultimately, the problems claimed directly by architectural culture—except, as in his criticism of Aymonino, when the conditions of reality were treated mimetically and thereby absorbed by architecture as part of its linguistic system. (This risk of miscomprehension explains, in part, the importance to Tafuri of the British architect James Stirling, who explored and extended the materials and

structures of architecture's historical languages to their breaking point.) If the transformation of language into silence as a refusal of the status of noise in architecture (as exemplified above by Rossi) can be read as the conceptual manoeuvre of the Whites, the transformation of noise into a form of language (Aymonino) underpins the American 'Grey' position for which Robert Venturi, Paul Rudolf and their contemporaries are regularly called upon to stand. They opened architecture to 'complexity and contradiction', to invoke the title of Venturi's seminal book (1966), while claiming the messiness of the popular and the everyday as an architectural language in its own terms and no longer as the noise in architecture's background: thus the importance, at this time, of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* (1964) or *Learning from Las Vegas*, by Venturi with Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour (1972).<sup>13</sup>

Extending our case to account for these American coordinates—which, it must be emphasised, shaped international debate for two decades or more—allows us to further illuminate and complexify the positions Tafuri read into Aymonino and Rossi and the way the *Quartiere Gallarate* captures two stances that attend to the matter of autonomy in the face of a messy reality. Tafuri directs us to consider architecture's capacity for internal accountability, the efficacy of its willingness to be tested against internally derived measures; and the concomitant 'duty of being aware' bound into the boudoir of the Marquis de Sade to which Tafuri alludes in the essay cited at the outset of his essay of 1974.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the autonomous architecture of Rossi lay the unordered noise of all those competing conditions external to architecture that Aymonino's project represented. Architecture could turn towards this reality in the name of criticism and critical action, sacrificing autonomy but activating its reliance on mimesis as a disciplinary and artistic tool with which to make sense of the world. This pits the value of noise against the values of language (structured and meaningful sound) or silence, being the absence of sound, but not necessarily of language, which can be mute and meaningful. Architecture could, under these terms, also hold itself aloof from noise by way of an insistently 'noiseful' stance (the American 'Grey' position), imitating the messy chaos of reality by claiming it as a value for architecture, or by absorbing and negating it in the manner of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who (writes Tafuri), 'speaks by making of silence a

mirror'—the literal void rendered as a conceptual solid, to invoke Eisenman's reflections on Mies's lesson.<sup>15</sup>

All of these positions, we need to note, are not realist in any pure sense. Even Aymonino, who regards 'noise' as architecture's proper context and content, claims noise as a value for architecture and thus regularises it within the 'language' that holds architecture together as an institution. For him, the critical effect of this noise is partially negated by the recourse made to existing institutional and conceptual structures. Nonetheless, we can read the tension between the noise of Aymonino's general scheme at the *Quartiere Gallarate* and the silence of Rossi's contribution to the project is a deliberate play on the part of both architects, a form of *modus vivendi* with implications for the general conditions of that culture of production and criticism from the end of the 1960s onwards. The exchange between these two figures speaks not only to the implications of historical debates concerning autonomy and integration as conceptual and political positions claimed by architectural polemicists in the 1970s, but also to the critical consequences and limitations of these positions as taken up by later generations who accommodated abstracted versions of those stances independent of the untidy historical circumstances from which they were resolved.

The production of buildings and urban quarters remained central to the practice of architecture at this time and in its wake, but as architecture in Italy became increasingly implicated in the political discourse of the extra-parliamentary left and its protest movements, the involvement of architects and the implication of architectural practice in capitalistic processes from building construction and urban planning through to the design and fabrication of industrial and mass-produced design objects exposed the limitations of architecture's claims for formal and conceptual autonomy in the face of capitalism as its most insidious context.<sup>16</sup> American debates on architectural autonomy during the 1970s centred for the most part on the White–Grey dialectic, yet the Italian thinking and projects, which in their abstraction prompted and upheld these positions, were underwritten by experience of a direct confrontation between architecture and wider sociopolitical concerns. They therefore contain a level of complexity ill matched by the demands of their readers to align with rather more absolute positions either for or against a strong claim upon architectural autonomy. Although there is much that was particular and



peculiar to the way that debate in architecture was structured in Italy, it also informed the broader currents of architectural theory as a debate centred on the United States across the 1970s, '80s and '90s that ultimately informed the direction of international architecture discourse through to the end of the last century.

Against noise, then, two counterpoints persist: language (as appropriation) and silence (as a linguistic end-game). Within this conceptual diagram, noise and silence read as consciously impossible values to which those architects and theoreticians operating in the historical moment of the Italian 1970s (and American 1980s) could adhere; that is, silence speaking to a tendency towards a formal and conceptual autonomy in which the architect defends that which belongs properly to architecture; noise posing the question of how far architecture can go in relinquishing what have traditionally or historically been its proper tools and tasks before ceasing to be architecture altogether. These positions have not disappeared with time, but remain active in the work that owes a debt of patrimony to this historical moment and its conceptual implications.

—Now

The discussion for which Tafuri's reading of Aymonino and Rossi has acted as a springboard suggests strong polar positions for architecture of the last four decades or so, in which autonomy and integration are opposite stances. These are, of course, difficult to uphold except at the rhetorical level of the claims made by architects for their work and by critics, historians and theoreticians for the work of others. As far as realised works of architecture are concerned we get further into our analysis of this question by speaking of positions within the work rather than by the more tempting move of characterising the position of the work or its author as a whole. Thus we have the possibility of moments of noise, moments of silence, moments when the random coalesces around patterns and meaning, and so forth. With this caveat in mind, the analogy of noise and its opposites continues to serve as an interpretative key to understand the present moment in light of the debates around architectural autonomy that enjoyed their height in the 1970s and which have sustained a recurrence in recent years. This is especially the case if we do not fail to recognise that they recall the conceptually imperfect positions of complete

autonomy and resolute introspection on one hand and, on the other, complete integration and capitulation to the extra-architectural forces shaping architecture.

Despite considerable changes both to architectural practice and the wider settings in which architecture has found itself since the 1970s—through the development of digital technologies of fabrication and representation, for example, and the further expansion of capitalist processes to which architecture has responded in an engaged way—contemporary architecture remains arguably bound to the question of its artistic, disciplinary identity and to the intellectual traditions that allow for a distinction between architecture, building and planning.<sup>17</sup> This persistence is doubtless informed by the legislative protection the term ‘architect’ enjoys in many countries and territories, just as it has, since the first decades of the twentieth century, been upheld by a professional infrastructure that advances the interest of architects without necessarily opening the conceptual category of architecture to scrutiny.<sup>18</sup>

A series of recent projects, however, that can be understood to operate at a level bound more to the ambitions of a critical discourse on architecture than practices that consolidate professional habits help us to consider the stakes of arguments, through practice, for autonomous architecture as well as its opposite. And in these, the positions we have characterised as silent and noisy remain useful interpretative keys. Works by Steven Holl Architects (founded 1976), Peter Zumthor (1979), and Office Kersten Geers David van Severn (2002) help us to address architectural autonomy as a matter of architecture’s claim as an autonomous art medium, architecture’s alignment with the manual arts, craft and construction as a matter of realising objects and engaging materials, and the negation of both categories by positioning architecture as an actor in economics, politics, fashion and ideology.<sup>19</sup> Our examples are hardly exhaustive, but they serve to illustrate the three broader tendencies to which we wish to draw attention: silence, language and noise.

The buildings of Steven Holl Architects achieve a kind of formal and conceptual silence by overtly privileging aesthetic and compositional considerations over matters of fabrication and realisation. The works of this practice are beautiful objects that treat context as a compositional value from which the building, as self-contained form, is ultimately distinct. While necessarily engaging with its wider



Figure 3: Cité de l'Océan et du Surf, Biarritz, by Steven Holl Architects with Solange Fabião  
(Photograph: topoleku, Creative Commons)

setting in order to realise conceptual projects as buildings, in cities, with money and building materials and labour and under regulations of various kinds, Holl nevertheless actively moves his firm's architecture towards the category of art—and therefore towards a condition insulated, even if only rhetorically, from the demands of building. Within this position, an introspection informed by an idea of formal and conceptual autonomy shapes the processes of generating and resolving architectural form and its effect in order to privilege the work of architecture as an object, where the means of its participation in institutional programs, including in what Terry Smith has called 'iconomy', and even the ways in which the work is used and maintained, take second place to its image as a resolved whole.<sup>20</sup>

Towards reality, then, and its concomitant noisiness, Holl's work assumes a determined silence that positions the architect and his work as artist and art respectively.<sup>21</sup> Unlike Rossi's contrapuntal, critical silence, however, this is a silence that treats all noise as a condition relegated to architecture's exterior. It does not

allow for the presence of noise even as a discursive value in the mode demonstrated by Aymonino. The dogmatic and absolutist stance of Holl's silence is fundamental and deliberate, which means that the task of fulfilling a design brief and operating within the world at large is downplayed and even overshadowed by his production of mute, beautiful form. An example bears this out.

Completed in 2011, the Cité de l'Océan et du Surf is a museum dedicated to knowledge of the ocean as a field of cultural and scientific study.<sup>22</sup> The highly acclaimed project grew out of a collaboration between Holl's firm and the Brazilian-born artist and architect Solange Fabião. The museum buildings explicitly refuse the vernacular vocabulary of red-tiled roofs favoured by the Tudoresque suburban holiday villas surrounding the site. As Keiran Long observed in the pages of *Architecture*, 'the juxtaposition of the minimal and modern Cité de l'Océan et du Surf ... with the surrounding grotesques is unintentionally hilarious: like an earnest teenager reading Goethe at Disneyland.'<sup>23</sup> The project's complete negation of built context, its clearly positioned refusal to engage with the mundane is, however, less interesting as a stance we can cast in absolute silence than the more complex relationship maintained between the museum buildings and the coastline they overtly acknowledge.

Fittingly for its institutional program, the museum grounds extend from the seaside site to meet the Biarritz coastline, setting up strategic ocean views and a formal relationship between the museum buildings and offshore rocky outcrops in the Bay of Biscay. If the coastline, the outcrops, the inland boundary of the site and the ocean itself constitute a contextual noise (albeit far from 'grotesque'), they are not absorbed into the project. Holl and Fabião instead keep them actively separate from the formally resolved elements that then assume an insistent formal autonomy. They internalise the architectonic and relational conditions of being within the ocean ('under the sea') or resting on its surface ('under the sky'), neutralising architecture's external conditions and contexts by refusing the effect of these conditions upon the buildings themselves, which are in turn rendered as objects. It may be more accurate to suggest that they translate those contexts into architectural terms, thereby absorbing that which exists outside the work into a field determined by the work.



Figure 4: Cité de l'Océan et du Surf, Biarritz, by Steven Holl Architects with Solange Fabião  
(Photograph: Christophe Durand, Creative Commons)

The architectural object, which is beautiful and sophisticated in and of itself, transmits a kind of conceptual white noise into its surrounds to extend the resolution found for the design brief by the architect–artist partnership. Tactically, this resolution stems from the level of abstraction applied by Holl and the series of decisions determining those elements of the site condition and the institutional

program the project will embrace. Holl and Fabião have no obvious interest in 'contracting' and representing the complexity of their subject as a real subject—the ocean and its costal conditions—but rather insist on a series of discrete and highly stylised gestures.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the rolling plaza of the Cité de l'Océan et du Surf, glowing lanterns and concrete 'undertow' spaces are uncompromising in their attention to a formal analogy bound to a highly abstract interpretation of the institutional program. This manoeuvre, this tendency towards silence, resonates with the approach taken by Holl in several of the museum and gallery projects he has proposed and realised, including many of his most famous works.

We also meet a kind of silence in Zumthor's work, but with the important difference that his preoccupation is with positioning architecture's autonomy through materiality and craft rather than by locating architecture as a discrete art form capable of sustaining disinterested attention. While this conception of architecture demands some engagement with the noise of reality—with materials, modes of fabrication and haptic experience—it further reinforces an internal, mute expression through its hermit-like recourse to a body of technical knowledge attendant to the craft of architecture and its traditions and precedents. By means of a sustained conceit that appears to favour a straightforward composition informed by an intimacy with the materials of his works, Zumthor treats the means of making architecture as privileged knowledge, even in relation to run-of-the-mill architecture. It is a restricted lexicon and therefore sufficiently detached to sustain a form of conceptual isolation from the context of architectural practice or, indeed, of the objects it produces.

Viewed as different aspects of the same basic insulating gesture, Holl's and Zumthor's works speak to architecture's difficult status as a 'useful art', dating back to the separation of art and craft in the eighteenth century and, even earlier, to the establishment of a modern concept of architecture as rooted in Renaissance thinking.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, Holl's and Zumthor's respective claims on architecture's behalf as to its conditions as art or craft leave open the opportunity to treat either as a specifically architectural approach in relation to the design and construction of built form, privileging the object and that which is irreducibly architectural about it. And in neither instance is noise welcome.





Therme Vals, by Peter Zumthor. Photograph by Micha L. Reiser. Wikimedia Commons.

The sculpted bathhouse blocks of the Therme Vals (completed 1996), made using local materials and construction practices, become silent through the overlaying of careful details that appear to overrule the project's more practical, purely structural dimensions.<sup>26</sup> As an addition to an existing 1960s resort complex, Zumthor's *therme* building appears as a sharp stone block protruding from the alpine landscape. In this sense, however, the block is read as constructed from local stone, as opposed to being an analogy for the quartzite rock. While a grassed roof and deep sections of stone wall anchor the structure to a steep mountainous landscape, the *therme* building exists as a rationalised moment in this natural context. Both the solid quartzite walls and the concrete slabs comprising the building's main components are expressed, but they tie seamlessly together and, defying their structural properties, the slabs cantilever over internal spaces as a series of roof elements separated by channels of glass. In placing material and construction-based knowledge at the service of such hyper-aesthetic detailing, Zumthor claims an element of craft for architecture rather than allowing the practical nature of this knowledge to read as an external condition of the work. The moments in which architecture claims and absorbs building (and its materials, and its technique) are conceptual moments rather than instances in which ideas and fabrication meet on an equal footing. The processes involved in the realisation of the building are external to Zumthor's architecture.

His stance thus parallels that of Holl, claiming fabrication rather than context on terms determined by architecture, silencing the noise of reality by absorbing it within a strong notion of architecture as a practice where the artful object shapes the field in which it is construed, be it a building site, a metaphysical context or the



Figure 6: Therme Vals, by Peter Zumthor  
(Photograph: Micha L. Reiser, Wikimedia Commons)

field of possibilities governing the technology and techniques of architectural production. While its terms ultimately differ from those of Holl or even Rossi earlier, this tactic engages with what we have, after Tafuri, characterised as silence in that it works to sustain architecture's intellectual and technical internalities, the discrete and irreducible set of its internal considerations within which resides, on different terms in each of our cases, the very concept of architecture and its various claims as art, discipline, technique, institution and so forth. The architect-as-artist and the architect-as-craftsman each claims a specificity for architecture—Holl's aesthetic autonomy; Zumthor's technical autonomy—that sets about to reduce the interference of noise, of reality, of those extra-architectural conditions that shape architectural practice. This search for silence, either through negation or isolation, serves to define architecture as separate from the world.

With one final case we turn away from silence as a conceit and from noise as a critical value towards silence as a form of architectural critique that does not (necessarily) revert to autonomy. Peter Eisenman's reading of Stirling's Leicester Engineering Building (1959–1963)—cited by Tafuri—describes the literal void that



works as a conceptual solid; Tafuri himself points to Mies's silence (another void) as reflective. In both instances, silence plays a meaningful role in the work. While in the latter case silence acts to negate noise (or that which functions as noise) in a variation of the manner we have seen above in Rossi's contribution to the Gallarate, in the former case silence serves as a kind of anti-language, as per Tafuri's reading of Stirling. The strategies in both works demand moments of structured autonomy—neither a 'natural' introspection nor an accident of 'absence', but an instrumental banishing of noise in the manner of the gesture Tafuri finds in Karl Krauss, who in 1914 writes: 'Let him who has something to say step forward and be silent.'<sup>27</sup> In neither case, as in the sentiment captured by Krauss, is the poignant silent independent of a position regarding noise (or its absence) and the audience that registers the same. They convey silence in relational terms, refusing silence as a value in and of itself.

This (political) possibility appears present in Office Kersten Geers and David Van Severen's (KGDVS) work *After the Party*—the Belgian Pavilion at the 2008 Venice Biennale—in which the restitution of the physical void serves as a dialectical negation. A double-skinned, galvanised steel-clad volume defined a second and temporary volume in front of the permanent Belgian Pavilion building, through which volume visitors were required to pass—literally through its intramural scaffolding—to enter a space emptied of everything except liberally strewn confetti and a handful of chairs. This 'Garden Room' served as the setting for *After the Party*, which deployed the void as 'one of the critical categories with which one can give architecture back its political significance' by providing still, open space in opposition to 'fullness'.<sup>28</sup> In the spirit of Mies and Stirling, but in relation to circumstances that could not concern their work less, Geers and van Severen reclaim a form of silence for a critical interaction with the present-day conditions of architectural practice and thought. As Aleksandr Bierig observed in the *Architectural Review*, it offers 'a direct rejoinder to the pervasive strategy that attempts to reduce complex cultural and historical terrain to a simplistic diagram'.<sup>29</sup> The architecture resides, for Office KGDVS, in the intentionality of this gesture.<sup>30</sup> This architecture's polemical potency lies in the programmatic trade of building for void, this choice for a moment in which noise is resolutely refused.



Figure 7: After the Party, by Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen  
(Photograph: Bas Princen. All rights reserved.)

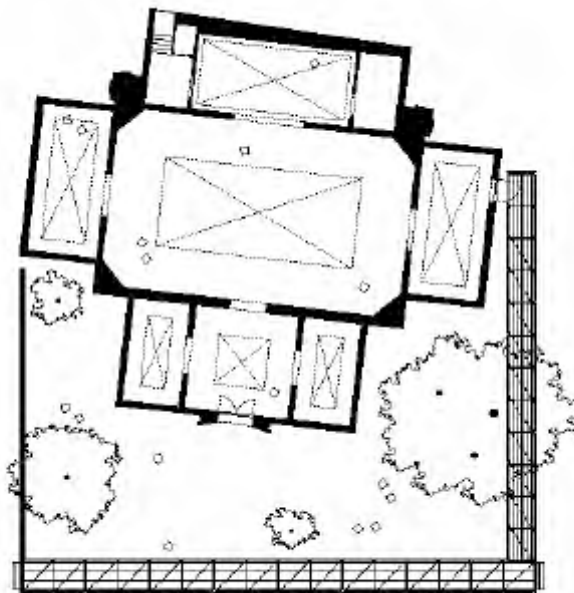


Figure 8: After the Party, by Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen.  
(Courtesy: OKGDVS. All rights reserved.)

*After the Party* stands at the moment in which the destitution of the once staggeringly effective imbrication of architectural values with those of neoliberal politics and economics was decisively demonstrated. Its staging in Venice coincided with the worldwide economic collapse, justifying Office KGDVS's suspicions that structural change to architectural culture was either necessary or imminent. Its relative silence was stark within a *giardino* populated by such desperate declarations of fidelity to late capitalism as documented in *Abundant*, the Australian entry of that same year. Architecture is thus defined, for the Belgian project, specifically by what it is not, turning its back on Australia and all the other pavilions by means of a seven-metre-high double-skinned wall, rejecting by staging the denouement of the 'sad historical moment' of the present—denying all that it aims not to be. Writes van Toorn:

Is this silence a temporary cessation, out of which we can decipher a new élan, a new vocabulary in architecture, one that avoids the murmurings of the present time? Or is there something else going on? What is certain is that it is a matter of an independent architecture that intends to manifest itself politically through its form.<sup>31</sup>

Here the inverse of noise is not a form of silence indicating introspection in the manner of Rossi at the Gallarate, a cleansing of architecture's language from the realities of architecture's place in the noisy world. It is a moment of programmatic absence informed by the knowledge that all language is one step from a return to meaninglessness. It thus returns architecture to the critical possibilities of architectural actions in which architecture's silence might in fact offer a way to connect to the world beyond. *After the Party* is an instant of silent confrontation in which the loud music disappears suddenly, the lights come on, and the stillness of the moment is rendered embarrassingly stark.

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903) in *The Blackwell City Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, Blackwell, Chichester, 2010, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Compare R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Destiny Books, Rochester, 1977; and John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and other Irregularities*, Routledge, London, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bull and Les Black, 'Introduction: Into Sound', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black, Berg, London, 2003, p. 11. Compare Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, *Ricerca del rinascimento. Principi, città, architettura*, Einaudi, Turin, 1992, English edn *Interpreting the Renaissance*, trans. Daniel Sherer, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 2006. See also Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, Rome, Laterza, 1968, pp. 19–94.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Attali, *Bruits: Essai sur l'économie de la musique*, Presse Universitaires de France, Paris, 1977, English edn, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1985, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, 'L'Architecture dans le boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language', *Oppositions*, vol. 3, 1974; revised for *La sfera e il labirinto. Avanguardie e architettura da Piranesi agli anni '70*, Einaudi, Turin, 1980, trans. Pellegrino d'Acierno as Robert Connolly as *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987 and anthologised in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays, MIT Press Cambridge, Mass., 1998, pp. 148–73. All quotations are from this latter source. On Tafuri's work more broadly, see Andrew Leach, *Manfredo Tafuri: Choosing History*, A&S Books, Ghent, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Reinhold Martin, 'Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism', *Harvard Design Magazine*, vol. 22, 2005, pp. 104–9 and Daniel Barber, 'Militant Architecture: Destabilising Architecture's Disciplinarity', *Journal of Architecture*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2005, pp. 245–53.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, John Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture*, BBC Books, London, 1963; and Paolo Portoghesi, *Francesco Borromini: Architettura come linguaggio*, Electa, Milan, 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Tafuri, 'L'Architecture dans le boudoir', pp. 157, 154. Compare Manfredo Tafuri, 'Il frammento e la città. Ricerca e exempla degli anni '70', *Storia dell'architettura italiana, 1944–85*, Einaudi, Turin, 1986, pp. 146–59.

<sup>10</sup> Fulvio Irace, 'Milano', in *Storia dell'architettura italiana: Il secondo novecento*, ed. Francesco Dal Co Electa, Milan, 1997, pp. 74–5.

<sup>11</sup> This is a pervasive theme of *La sfera e il labirinto*. Compare Tafuri's contemporaneous essay 'Borromini e Piranesi. La città come "ordine infranto"' in *Piranesi tra Venezia e l'Europa. Atti del convegno internazionale di studio promosso dall'Istituto di storia dell'arte della fondazione Giorgio Cini per il secondo centenario della morte di Giovan Battista Piranesi, Venezia, 13–15 ottobre 1978*, ed. Alessandro Bettagno, Leo S. Olschki, Florence, 1983, pp. 89–101.

<sup>12</sup> Tafuri, 'L'architecture dans le boudoir', p. 148. Compare Tafuri, *Five Architects NY*, 3rd edn, Officina, Rome, 1977, 1998, esp. 'Les bijoux indiscrets', pp. 7–33; see also Nadia Watson, 'The Whites vs the Grays: Re-Examining the 1970s Avant-Garde', *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* (hereafter *Fabrications*), vol. 15, no. 1, July 2005, pp. 55–69.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966; Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1964; Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. edn, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1972, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Tafuri, 'L'architecture dans le boudoir', p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 158, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Emilio Ambasz (ed.), *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972. The exhibition was on show from 26 May to 11 September 1972. See also Alexandra Brown, 'Operaismo, Architecture and Design in Ambasz's *New Domestic Landscape*: Issues of Redefinition and Refusal in 1960s Italy' in *Imagining ... Proceedings of the 27th International SAHANZ Conference*, ed. Michael Chapman and Michael Ostwald Newcastle, NSW, Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ), 2010, pp. 52–7; and 'A Night at the Space Electronic, or the Radical Architecture of 1971's *Vita, Morte e Miracoli di Architettura*' in *Fabulation: Myth, Nature, Heritage, the 29th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Stuart King, Anuradha Chatterjee and Stephen Loo Launceston, SAHANZ, 2012, pp. 147–57.

<sup>17</sup> In recent years, Reinhold Martin and K. Michael Hays have pursued this theme from different directions in, respectively, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 2008 and *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant Garde*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2010. Compare Claire Zimmerman's insightful review of these two titles: 'Absent or Deferred? Utopia and Desire in Postmodern Architecture', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2011, pp. 297–302. See also Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> On this point compare Deborah van der Plaats, "'Architectural Ignorance and Public Indifference": Harold Desbrowe-Anneer's Lecture on "Some Methods of Architectural Criticism" (1893)', *Fabrications*, vol. 19, no. 1, June 2009, pp. 162–75.

<sup>19</sup> On the various claims made for architecture's status as an art (and criticisms thereof), see also Andrew Leach and John Macarthur (eds), *Architecture, Disciplinarity, and the Arts*, A&S Books, Ghent, 2009. Compare Alexandra Brown, 'Complexities, Discrepancies and Ambiguities: Assessing the Disciplinarity of Herzog & de Meuron's Architecture through Judd's Generic Art', *EMAJ*, vol. 4, 2009, <<http://www.melbournartjournal.unimelb.edu.au/e-maj>> (accessed 12 August 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2006, pp. 5–8.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Steven Holl, *Architecture Spoken*, New York, Rizzoli, 2007; *Scale*, Zurich, Lars Müller Verlag, 2011; *Parallax*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2000, p. xxii. See the archdaily.com project profile at <<http://www.archdaily.com/135874/museum-of-ocean-and-surf-steven-holl-architects-in-collaboration-with-solange-fabiao/>> (accessed 20 January 2012).

<sup>22</sup> See the archdaily.com project profile at <<http://www.archdaily.com/135874/museum-of-ocean-and-surf-steven-holl-architects-in-collaboration-with-solange-fabiao/>> (accessed 20 January 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Kieran Long, 'Cité de l'Océan et du Surf', *Architect*, vol. 100, no. 9, September 2011, p. 210.

<sup>24</sup> Compare Bart Verschaffel, *Architecture is (as) a Gesture*, Quart, Lucerne, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Compare the discussions in Leach and Macarthur (eds), *Architecture, Disciplinarity, and the Arts*; and Joseph Rykwert, *The Judicious Eye: Architecture Against the Other Arts*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> See the archdaily.com project profile at <<http://www.archdaily.com/13358/the-therme-vals/>> (accessed 31 January 2012). Also Sigrid Hauser, *Peter Zumthor Therme Vals*, Verlag Scheidegger and Spiess, Zurich, 2007; and Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd edn, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Tafuri, 'L'Architecture dan le boudoir', p. 155. Tafuri cites from a speech recorded in Karl Krauss, *In These Great Times*, Engendra Press, Montreal, 1976.

<sup>28</sup> Roemer van Toorn, 'The Sterile Pleasure of Negation', in *The Specific and the Singular: Architecture in Flanders, 2008–2009 Yearbook*, ed. Gideon Boie, Kristiaan Borret, Ilse Degerickx, Maarten Delbeke,

Dieter De Clercq, Janina Gosseye, Andre Loeckx, Jan Mannaerts, Katrien Vandermariliere and Koen Van Synghel, Flemish Architecture Institute, Antwerp, 2010, pp. 79–85.

<sup>29</sup> Aleksandr Bierig, 'Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen: A Belgian Firm Asks Old Questions in New Ways', *Architectural Review*, vol. 197, no. 12, December 2009, p. 81. Compare the image-essay Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen, 'De Compositie van het Beeld: Over het Geconstrueerde Beeld als Gereedschap van de Architectuur' in *Over Schoonheid: Hedendaagse Beschouwingen bij een Klassiek Begrip*, ed. Marc Verminck, A&S Books, Ghent and de Buren, and 2008, following p. 88.

<sup>30</sup> Marcel Mauer, interview with Kersten Geers and David Van Severen, *GizmoWeb*, <[www.gizmoweb.org/2012/03/](http://www.gizmoweb.org/2012/03/)> (accessed 7 July 2012). Bart Verschaffel astutely points to the legacy in this respect of architecture's deconstructive turn, which coloured the formative years of these architects, in 'Ver Voorbij de Deconstructie. De Architectuuropvatting van Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen', *De Witte Raaf*, vol. 25, no. 148, November–December 2010, pp. 7–10.

<sup>31</sup> van Toorn, p. 79.